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ABSTRACT

Verbal and nonverbal cues in the working environment are examined in the hope of leading to better morale and productivity. Among topics covered are furniture arrangements, status symbols, letterheads, and conventions of address. Examples for corporations and institutions are provided. Methods of assessing the informal communications within an organization are suggested. Simple changes also are recommended. (SK)

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COMMUNICATION GAMEMANSHIP

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Working from the premise that the greatest productivity emerges from "I'm OK-You're OK" adult-adult transactions and that verbal and non-verbal cues in the communications environment elicit non-OK responses, this paper examines the cues in the working environment, from furniture arrangements to status symbols, letterheads, and conventions of address, making recommendations which, it is hoped, will lead to better morale and productivity, focusing on the job and not on games people play.

Improving The Climate For Communication

Not too long ago while waiting to cross an intersection I was lured out into the street by a truck's flashing yellow turn signal. The signal told me that since the truck was turning in at that corner, I would have time to cross the line of traffic. But the signal was false. The driver kept on going, unconscious of the signal he was putting out. I was nearly run down.

We put out many such signals, each with a subtle effect on morale and productivity. As professional communicators we have the responsibility to recognize their potential. Architecture, furniture, lighting, clothes, procedures, letterheads, and formats all communicate to our customers, associates, and employees what we think of ourselves and what we expect of others. People are so malleable that they will respond in the way they are expected to! If we mislead them with wrong signals, productivity suffers. Let me show you how it works and we'll discuss ways of improving the signals we send out. The kinds of signals are non-verbal and verbal.

External Cues

Even before we enter a building we become aware of the attitude of management to customers and employees. There is a caste system in many organizations. At GM in Detroit I'm told that there are separate parking lots for executives and blue collar workers. The executive lot is kept spotlessly clean, but the blue collar workers' lot is littered with paper and empty beer cans. At Honeywell one of the first things changed years ago by a management consultant was to abolish private parking spaces. The employee who walks in the rain from the far end of the lot is not well motivated by the "Reserved for President" sign on the space closest to the front door. The rationale behind abolition of reserved spaces also suggests that it does a president good to walk in the rain. It's a great leveler.

The way we delegate space inside the building also sends out signals. Our position on the ladder of success is easily measured by the discerning observer: the size and position of the office, the thickness of the carpet (if there is one), the altitude in the building (upper floor offices are closer to heaven and God is at the top). Even the number of potted plants--plastic or exotic tropical--is an indicator of status. We're all familiar with these physical signs. Those of us who have these symbols are proud of our success, impressed with our progress in the hierarchy. But the symbols of success can become confused with the goal. Do we work for greater self-fulfillment, or do we work to get the corner office on the next floor up? Do we work for greater productivity or for the key to the executive washroom? In the "I'm OK-You're OK" world of transactional analysis, the accoutrements of office--the custom-made desk, the potted plants, and the sterling silver water carafe--all tell the world "I'm OK." But the rest of the statement is "You're not as OK as I am." That's not good communications management.

I'm told that at Texas Instruments great care is taken to make all offices exactly the same size. The sign on the door has the name of the person behind it, not her title, and everyone is

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on a first-name basis. What counts is not your title , but how well you do your job.

One of our local judges had a very good understanding of the psychological effect of furniture and space. He insisted that his judge's bench be so high that no "punk college kid" could look down on him. Unfortunately, he depended too much on his throne for his authority and did such a poor job that he was literally unseated. True, it's one of the rules of interrogation to make the accused uncomfortable so he's at a psychological disadvantage--to stand at attention while the interrogator sits--to be blinded by the white light so he cannot see his questioners in the dark. But should we arrange our offices so we make our customers, visitors, and colleagues uncomfortable? Should the visitor's chair be spartan and three inches lower than ours? Some people think so and use such tricks in a form of psychological warfare.

Try this experiment in communication gamesmanship: At the next committee meeting or dinner party you're invited to, get there early enough to sit at the head of the table. Then watch for the responses of others there, and the host! What do they tell you and how do they communicate it?

Must you have the captain's chair to function as host? The high throne to be king? Have we confused the status symbols for responsibilities of the job? If the symbols become the job, people may be enticed by the symbols to rise above their level of competence. This is no good for any organization.

It's important that we realize when we are putting out the wrong signals and interpret other signals correctly. This subject alone could be discussed at great length, but there is time only for some examples to help us focus.

Ann Landers' syndicated newspaper column carried a letter of complaint from a woman who said she was happily married and not looking for entertainment elsewhere but that she was always being propositioned--by cab drivers, by grocery carry-out boys, by the most unlikely people--though she never wore provocative clothing or makeup, even went shopping in curlers. Ann Landers' comment was that the woman was sending out signals she wasn't aware of. Movie directors looking for a new Marilyn Monroe look for a woman whose features and posture put out the same signals: I'm available. Some wives are surprised when their husbands report seeing signals other women don't notice.

It happens in other ways, too.

In the early days at Westinghouse the great inventor, Steinmetz, was given free reign to explore his own blue sky of electrical engineering. A small, ugly man with a permanent black cigar, he was vital to the company. From time to time management would look in on that great genius to see what he was up to. One day when a visitor went looking for him, Steinmetz was missing. "Where's Steinmetz?" His secretary hadn't seen him for weeks. They found him at home, sullen, but determined. "No cigars, no Steinmetz," he said. He had walked into the factory weeks before, taken one look at the new "No Smoking" signs and had gone home.

He had gotten the message: He stopped smoking <u>at the plant</u>. But he didn't stop smoking! His absence was a non-verbal message telling the company what he thought of the smoking policy! How often my students have been told that the art of communication is not simply to be understood, but not to be misunderstood!

Written communication is full of misleading signals. The Michigan Secretary of State just published rules of the road for Michigan boaters that say that boats are not to be driven within 100 feet of a dock! This requires very long gangplanks and could ruin the boat bumper business. Some people collect such confused signals, and we are lucky if they only lead to laughter.

The subtle signals we get from standard bureaucratic forms of internal communication are subject to a lot of misinterpretation which hurts feelings, causes jealousies, and damages morale. Correspondence with distribution to more than one person is likely to be very tense. In an organization nervous with status seekers and sensitive to the pecking order, that list of addressees is closely scrutinized. The most important person is often at the top of the list. But where are you? Who is just above you? Just below? Did the sender get your title correctly? Or did she write "Professor" when she should have written "Doctor?" This may be psychological warfare as described in Stephen Potter's "One-Upmanship." It's the art of the put-down, the trick of making the other person "not-OK." Take the time my letter of complaint was replied to with a letter addressed to "Marly Pachs." The trouble is, one-upmanship is a destructive game. One does not become a better person by putting someone else down.

My own "Finley Failure Formula" is a guide to paranoic, counter-productive behavior within an organization. According to it, the thing to do with distribution lists on correspondence is to retype the message for each recipient, putting the misspelled names of the people you want to insult at the bottom, and the name of each person you want to flatter at the top of his copy. Of course, retyping wastes time, but under the "Finley Failure Formula", failure is the eventual result even though it is not the stated goal. The productive solution, of course, is to do away with the titles and the pecking order and put the names in alphabetically. If not, you're in the same boat as the author who gives away signed, numbered copies of his book to his best friends. "But my copy is only number two," you complain, and the author replies, "Mother got number one." His alternative is to number each presentation copy number one and risk being found out, or not to number them at all. Yet is is the act of gift-giving that is important. The numbering spoils the transaction.

Far more destructive to productivity in internal communications is found at the bottoms of letters under "carbon copies to". Here is where you can detect the telltale signs of the game NGYSOB, or "Now I've got you, you SOB." The memo or letter blames the addressee for something that's gone wrong, and the carbon copies have gone to his boss, your boss, the president of the company, and anybody else you want to precipitate on the addressee's head. What follows is a flurry of memos, a snowstorm of paper. Files get fatter, with everyone keeping memos sent to and about each other. Everyone gets tense, productivity goes down, and someone gets fired. The way to avoid that nasty game is not to play it. Use the telephone or a personal visit for your reply. Don't play parlor games.

<u>Cue Summary</u>

So here we are, arriving at Acme Acne, Incorp-

orated. There is an iron gate with a sign, "Keep out. After closing hours killer dogs are loose in this area." Beside the entrance to the building is a parking place designated "Reserved for the President." The front door has no window and opens only after you've buzzed and identified yourself. Once inside you approach a small window of one-way glass and state your business to the invisible person inside. What is this? The Russian Embassy?

If you do get led past the employees, you find them huddled in cramped, Dickensian quarters, then discover that the middle management is upstairs with carpeted floors and there's a private elevator to the president's office at the top of the building--the only room with a view. All the external cues are negative. Who, beside the boss, would want to work in such a place?

I once interviewed a manager in just such an office--it was elegant, but so far removed from the rest of the factory that he had little idea of what was going on downstairs.

Changing Territorial Boundaries

What can we do about it? Let me suggest some communication gamesmanship, pastimes you can play if you remember their goals are to increase productivity and improve morale. The Japanese commander at the River Kwai said, "Be happy in your work." The Japanese method is to build happiness, security, and loyalty for the purpose of company stability and productivity.

I discovered that my own territory was set up in the wrong way. Because I sat between the door and the visitor's chair, my chair was a barrier. Students visiting me in my office had to go around me to get in and sit down, or stand uncomfortably in the doorway while I sat. If they did sit down, they found their escape blocked. They could not get out of the office without going around the back of my chair. Solution? Switch the chairs so visitors could come in and sit down immediately. But the chairs are not equal. Mine swivels and the visitor's does not. The next step is either to make them both swivel chairs, or exchange chairs. So much for my own work space. You try it on your own.

Another problem of that awkward exit behind my chair was that my space was invaded. You don't have to be a reader of The Naked Ape to recognize our habits of never coming too close to one another. We are very uncomfortable in elevators and subways. In our society people do not touch each other. We draw back from those who insist on approaching to within inches of our faces to talk to us. Yet in New Guinea when people of stone age culture meet, they embrace, putting arms around shoulders. Without sexual connotations, men hold hands while walking or talking. There seems to be a continuous physical contact as an expression of friendliness and warmth. In our culture a formal handshake is our ritual of non-belligerence, and a handshake held too long becomes embarrassing. I don't suggest that we should start hugging each other, but the openness and warmth between stone age people is admirable. Our awareness of the effect of intimate space on our communications climate is a first step in management of that space and of our communication with each other.

Remember how space was arranged in the army? You never shook hands with the commanding officer. On entering his office you marched up in front of the desk, stood at attention, and saluted. Try this on your boss: enter the room, take a visitor's chair from its position in the corner, move it up beside or even behind the desk, sit down, and call the boss by her first name.

Granted, you have to be aware of the climate. People used to salutes may need time to adjust to invasion of space. Does this invasion of her territory make her uncomfortable? If the person you're visiting feels ill at ease or threatened you will not get anything done. All you will incur is suspicion or hostility.

Your object in all this is to establish equal level adult-adult transactions: "I'm OK-You're OK" and not "I'm a little more OK than you are." If a supervisor or a teacher is forced to assume the role of parent, the cue is for the employee or the student to respond as a child. Remember--people tend to respond to cues in the way they are expected to. Just as charisma is the ability to miraculously assume a larger role by merely being in it, there's an anti-charisma to being placed in a lesser role. There's something about a barracks that says, "be alike, be subservient, be dumb." We don't all work in barracks, but our environments dictate responses, too.

Take the classroom, for instance. It elevates the professor and conventionally groups the students so his face is the only one they see directly. Students are audience and listeners, not participants, and not equal by their position in the room. Maybe that's why graduate courses are called seminars and are grouped around a large table. Around a table students are on a more equal footing, but the professor is still at the head of the table.

Those lesser positions encourage "less than OK" responses. The same applies to forms of address. These are signals, too. I used to joke about titles. As an instructor with a Master's degree I sometimes told students that they could not address me as "Doctor" or "Instructor" but that "Yes, Master" was the appropriate form! But seriously, one of my students recently complained that calling me "Professor" when I called him "Mister" created a barrier. So I started calling all my students by their first names on the condition that they call me Harley. The atmosphere changed. More were willing to ask questions. Communication improved. I realized that being called "Professor" was an artificial means of reenforcing my authority. Was I so insecure? Was my title the equivalent of that judge's bench? So I shifted immediately to calling not only my students by their first names but my supervisors and all of the upper level administrators by theirs, as well!

Try it. In your office does the secretary address you as "Sir" or by your title, or use your last name while you address him as James? Why not equalize it? If your ability to exert authority depends on being called "Sir" you're not a leader.

That's why you should get that title off the door and off the desk. You might start to change our terrible American habit of confusing the man with his job. If you are introduced to someone, the first thing they ask is what you do. They are trying to categorize you. It is easier to peg someone as a white Presbyterian with an Engineering degree who earns twenty thousand a year than it is to know her as Anne, who believes in God and likes to design bridges. But it is a lot nicer to know people than it is to peg them. Personalization humanized our communication, just as depersonalization dehumanizes us. Remember how much easi-

er it was to kill Vietnamese if they were called gooks instead of people? President Johnson always tried to shake hands with as many people as possible. "Touch flesh" was his favorite way of humanizing himself as a candidate. What if we had shaken hands with the Vietnamese, walked arm in arm, and known each other by our first names?

Yet we still use titles and wage little communication wars. We can start making changes for the better in our written correspondence, too, by becoming less formal.

When writing a letter, skip the title and the Ms. and go right to the first name. The address may have to be "Julia Jones, President, Acme Acne, Inc." but you can start the letter with her first name.

The conventional "Dear so-and-so" is old fashioned. Some organizations have dropped salutations entirely. But to do so is to omit a positive stroke--use of a person's first name. Let the letter begin, "At our Tuesday meeting, Jack..." and then continue the letter with the first paragraph. It may be awkward to try to get a name in after the first phrase, but it's personal and direct.

Editors know very well the importance of saying something positive in a critique so as not to break the hearts of all rejected authors. Even printed rejection slips say things like "We have read your manuscript with great interest, etc." before they come to the key word "regret." Every letter has a potential for positive reenforcement. Even Trotsky, had he survived the assasin's axe, might have written Stalin, "Your perseverance and tenacity in pursuing political enemies are remarkable."

So far I've discussed ways we can try to manage communication from the bottom up. It would be easier to administer it from the top down, but we are an organization of professional communicators, not of company presidents. We don't have the authority. To address the president of the company by his first name is like the tail trying to wag the dog. But with tact and diplomacy it is possible.

Assessing A Network's Effectiveness

There are other possibilities that take time and need the endorsement and backing of management, plus the trust and support of the employees. Eric Goldhaber, in his book Organizational Communications, describes an experiment with rumor in an attempt to assess internal, informal communications. With the knowledge and consent of management, a rumor is planted within the internal communications network. Several days later the staff is surveyed, being asked to write down what they heard, who they heard it from, and whether they believed it. In this case the purpose is to discover links in the grapevine and assess its effectiveness as an internal communications medium to be used deliberately by management as an alternative to memos, bulletins, etc. But this method is subject to distrust if the climate in the organization is bad. People respond to leading questions in the way they are expected to, just as they respond to other environmental cues. People who don't trust the system will also lie rather than reveal their sources of juicy gossip, and some may maliciously scuttle the survey with deliberately misleading answers. Of course, many will pocket-veto it by never replying, or simply throw it away.

A more likely possibility for discovering the informal communication network is a sociometric survey asking things like, "Who would you never ask for information? Why?" and "If you wanted to know something about the organization without the knowledge of management, who would you ask?" The best basic answer here, by the way, is the janitors and the secretaries. They cross formal divisional barriers and have coffee together. They soon know what's going on before the news becomes "official."

Some weaknesses of the survey method have already been mentioned. They easily lose credibility and become part of the communications overload--a flurry of memos, announcements, internal and external junk mail that cuts into job effectiveness. Before a survey is undertaken it must be justified and planned carefully.

One of the weaknesses in large organizations is the lack of horizontal communication. Downward communication is provided for by the normal flow of line authority. Upward flow may be hindered by distrust. But horizontal flow from department to department is not a regular process and is in fact discouraged. One of my colleagues was severely reprimanded because he surveyed other users of liquid nitrogen in order to write the justification section of an unsolicited proposal that the university buy a liquid nitrogen generator. Management expected queries to move up through the hierarchy and then back down again!

Our own organization has weak horizontal communications. True, some units publicize their activities across the entire staff using the internal mail system, but because this is not done selectively many people who are not interested in the information get it and throw it away. In some organizations employees have become so overloaded that they throw away all the internal mail! Using the Faculty Association's annual magazine, "Faculty Forum" I have prepared a questionnaire that presents a series of management situations with a range of reactions. The results can be machine-scored and are strictly anonymous to avoid the pitfalls of mistrust and low morale. The person completing the survey is asked to select which attitude most closely describes his own assessment of our organization's management climate, whether the so-called theory X, classical dictatorship characterized by low morale, no upward communication, and little positive reenforcement, or theory Y, the social systems school of management which encourages upward communication and decisions participated in at lower levels. Intermediate choices are offered between those extremes. The results should be revealing.

Every organization is different, with its own key personalities, traditions, stumbling blocks, and structure. Seasonal changes in the work load change the communications load, too. In a very short time it is possible to discredit one form of internal communication. In our organization we have had periods of low morale when rumor and the grapevine seemed to be the only form of horizontal communication. During one such period we received a letter from the administration attempting to discredit rumor as a source of information and appointing one person--who enjoyed low trust--as official rumor squelcher! This obviously didn't work. But the appointment of someone else might have made the method credible and replacement of rumor with something more official as an accurate substitute would have made rumors unnecessary. Written formal communication may be accurate but

is slower than informal. The trouble with rumor as a communications medium is that certain news travels through the grapevine and other news doesn't. The adage, "Bad news travels fast" applies.

Yet it is possible to tailor a simulation for your own organization to assess the effectiveness of various media. Two methods can be used to disseminate certain information in two different divisions of the organization, and a form of feedback established to check on the effectiveness. This is commonly done by advertisers who place special offers with coupons in certain publications to see which brings in the greatest response. Remember, though, we're here to get the job done, not play games. There is a great temptation to lose perspective, to make pastimes out of communication games. This can lead to higher morale, which is fine, but it must not lower productivity.

Usually a great deal of static can be tolerated as long as an organization continues to function. As Parkinson's Law describes, organizations undergo slow, protracted deaths. The task of the communicator is to make a continuous assessment of organizational effectiveness and communication's role. You have to be awake to and aware of subtle signs of decay.

Role Assessment

One experiment that you can conduct is to get everyone to write his own job description and the job description of his boss, without peeking at the official file of job descriptions! When they've all been written, exchange copies. If your concept of what the boss does doesn't correspond with his own, and vice versa, there's a communications gap bound to lead to misunderstandings and friction. The written exercize can be followed up by a staff meeting to discuss the discrepancies. It is a lot easier to work effectively with someone when you understand his tasks.

I hope that these words have heightened your awareness of what you can do to improve the atmosphere, morale, and effectiveness of your working environment. Take a good look at the arrangement of your office furniture, at the sign on the door, at the tone of your correspondence. Do you and those you work with understand and respect your interlocking roles? Small changes can quickly accumulate to subtly alter and improve our effectiveness on the job. Have a good day.